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Martin Dusinberre

DIMBY: Kaminoseki and the making/breaking of modern Japan

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Martin Dusinberre's new book, [*Hard Times in the Hometown: A History of Community Survival in Modern Japan*](#) (Hawaii, 2012), focuses on Kaminoseki, a planned nuclear site in western Japan. Dusinberre weaves the stories of individual townspeople into the wider history of modern Japan from the nineteenth century to the present day. Here, he summarizes some of the key arguments of the book with regard to nuclear power, and updates the story from the middle of 2011, when he finished the manuscript.

Keywords: NIMBY, atomic energy, nuclear village, nuclear subsidies, civil society, town-making, Iwaishima, Chugoku Electric, depopulation, furusato

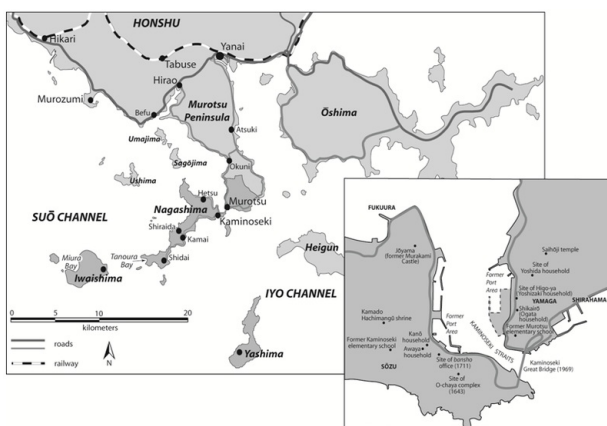
I

There were, in the eyes of some observers, not one but two crises in Japan in the spring of 2011. First came the horrifying sequence of events triggered by the magnitude 9.0 earthquake and tsunami in the northeast, including the meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear power plants and the loss of lives, livelihoods, hope and history.

And then, hundreds of kilometres away, in the Inland Sea port of Kaminoseki, southeast Yamaguchi prefecture, there was a somewhat more existential crisis. 'The reality,' opined one town councillor in April 2011—having evoked 'the crisis-like situation of our town [population then 3,550], in which problems of depopulation and aging persist'—'is that if we don't proceed with town-making policies, then the development of the municipality, and even its very existence, is at threat.' Two months later, in June, a Kaminoseki lobbyist similarly bemoaned the local situation and criticized central government indecision. 'If things go on like this,' he said, 'the town will sink.'¹

To be clear: next to nothing happened in Kaminoseki in the spring of 2011. There was no tsunami and no nuclear fallout from Fukushima, other than a brief scare over radioactive caesium in locally-sold beef later that summer. To visit the municipality two weeks after 3.11, as I did, was to ease oneself once again into the gentle rhythms of small-town life in a rural Japanese periphery.

But Kaminoseki is not any old small-town periphery. In the mid-1980s, its municipal council voted by a 16-1 majority to request the construction of a nuclear power plant in the town. This was an example not of the more commonly studied NIMBY phenomenon,² but rather of DIMBY—Definitely In My Back Yard. Consequently, there was severe political fallout in Kaminoseki in the spring of 2011—precisely because of the fact that, since 15 March, nothing had happened. Until that date, construction on Japan's newest nuclear power plant had proceeded apace, with hundreds of workers and sub-contractors of Chugoku Electric Power Company swarming Tanoura bay, in the far west of Nagashima island. This being a rare 'green-field' site—eight of the nuclear industry's other nine planned reactors, as of March 2011, were to be built at existing power plants in Japan, including two more at Fukushima Daiichi³—the construction focused first on a massive land reclamation project in Tanoura.



Map of Kaminoseki town, Yamaguchi prefecture

In the wake of the Fukushima disaster, however, construction was suspended. On 27 June 2011, Yamaguchi governor Nii Sekinari then declined to extend planning permission for Chugoku Electric to continue its land reclamation work until government policy was clarified. (The position of new governor Yamamoto Shigetaro, elected on 29 July 2012, is to 'inherit' Nii's stance with regard to Chugoku Electric, although what this means in practice is unclear.)⁴

To pronuclear supporters in the town, including the aforementioned town councillor and local lobbyist, the suspension of construction was a cause of some despair. In a saga stretching back to 1981, they had fought for three decades to realize their DIMBY dream, and serious work on the site had finally begun on 21 February 2011. Now, to borrow the words of Prime Minister Kan Naoto in May 2011, they were '[back to the drawing board](#)'. As one senior official put it to me in the weeks after 3.11, 'Nuclear power is scary, but it would be scarier *not* to build the nuclear plant here.'⁵

As the extent of the Fukushima disaster became clear, and as Kan attempted to challenge the pronuclear assumptions that have driven Tokyo policy since the early 1950s, Kaminoseki found itself at the centre of national and even

international media attention. Long feature articles in [The Los Angeles Times](#) and [The New York Times](#) introduced the stories of antinuclear activists living on Iwaishima island, a district that directly faces the Tanoura site. A piece in [The Wall Street Times](#) focused on the lead-up to the town's mayoral election in September 2011, talking up the chances of an Iwaishima challenger defeating the pronuclear incumbent.

But there was a basic problem in the journalists' approaches. As Tomomi Yamaguchi pointed out in this journal, and as I argued in a short comment for [The Guardian](#), we need to make space to hear not only the voices of antinuclear activists in places such as Kaminoseki but also those of the pronuclear lobby.⁶ In so doing, we must overcome a certain scepticism concerning the tone of the pronuclear pronouncements.

One might question, for example, the appropriateness of 'sinking' (*chinbotsu*) as a metaphor for Kaminoseki's fate just a few months after parts of Tohoku had literally sunk below the waves, resulting in the loss of 20,000 lives. Taste aside, however, the feelings of unease and desperation on the part of pronuclear activists in Japan in the wake of 3.11 were real and they deserve our attention.

Moreover, the language of 'crisis' was not just an emotional outburst in response to 3.11 and its aftermath. It was part of a much longer discourse, stretching back to the 1980s, by which the construction of a nuclear power plant in Kaminoseki was framed for townspeople in terms of 'town-making policies', and in which the risks of on-going depopulation and aging to the hometown were considered to be 'scarier' than the risks of nuclear power itself. This framing of nuclear power at a local level helps explain the otherwise extraordinary result of the Kaminoseki mayoral election in September 2011, when the incumbent defeated his antinuclear challenger in a two-to-one landslide. Just six months after Japan's biggest nuclear accident, Kaminoseki's townspeople (on an 88 per cent turnout) had recorded their biggest pronuclear vote to date.⁷

The mayoral result came as a surprise to outsiders because they made the mistake of thinking that the Kaminoseki election was a referendum on nuclear power. It was not. Instead, it was a vote about the survival of the hometown. As one 71-year-old voter explained to the *Asahi Shinbun*, 'I am concerned about the risks involved in a nuclear power plant, but our town will decline without it. I don't care whether it will be built or not.'

At one level, such a reaction marked the snatching of victory for the pronuclear lobby—in Kaminoseki, and in Japan—from the jaws of defeat. Even as the Japanese nuclear industry reeled from the onslaught of post-Fukushima revelations about mismanagement and about the close bonds (some might call them *kizuna*)⁸ between company officials, bureaucrats and politicians, townspeople in one nuclear village were unable or perhaps unwilling to see beyond the rhetorical devices by which the issue has long been framed.

But if events in Kaminoseki since 3.11 tell us something about the continued strength of Japan's metaphorical 'nuclear village', they also suggest a story about the nation and its history more generally, in particular about the role of the real, physical village in the development of the modern Japanese state. How, we might ask, had the town declined in the first place? Why did town leaders engage in DIMBY, and why did a majority of townspeople support them? And in what ways does Kaminoseki's modern history throw light on the causes of the Fukushima debacle, and on the new and unwanted disaster label, 'Made in Japan'?⁹

The answers to those questions are complex but they are important in helping us understand not only Japan's recent past but also its immediate future, especially given the continuing debates over the restart of the country's mostly dormant nuclear reactors. To start, we must travel to Kaminoseki—both to the town today and also back into its long, rich history. For simplicity's sake, therefore, I suggest we take our directions from four roadside billboards along the way.

II

The first sign may be found shortly after one passes into the municipality of Kaminoseki, driving south down the mountainous Murotsu peninsula (see Figure 1 above). On the left are the offices of Chugoku Electric, established in 1985. Then, as we crest the brow of a hill, we see the following image under the slogan, 'A town of vitality and richness through nuclear power.'



'A town of vitality and richness through nuclear power':
Murotsu district, Kaminoseki town¹⁰

The sign depicts the Kaminoseki straits, where the Inland Sea narrows to surge between the southern end of the Murotsu peninsula and the eastern tip of Nagashima island. For many centuries before the Kaminoseki Great Bridge was completed (in 1969), the sheltered bays of Murotsu village and Kaminoseki village, on the eastern and western sides of the straits respectively, had served as an ideal location for the crews of sailing ships to rest and refuel en route from Shimonoseki to Osaka or back. In the first half of the Edo period (1603-1868), feudal lords from western Japan rested here on their way to alternate attendance in Edo, and the Korean Embassies also stopped in Kaminoseki on eleven of the twelve occasions they came to Japan.

In those days, of course, there was no lighthouse as depicted in the sign, but there were beacons above the straits and stone lanterns to guide the ships into port. One such lantern stood in the heart of Kaminoseki port in front of the Kaga-ya household. Along with a dozen or so other households in Kaminoseki, the Kaga-ya was a wholesale shipping agent (*ton'ya*). By the late Edo period, these agents had become very rich by serving the growing numbers of ships that passed along the important Inland Sea trading routes. The Choshu domain, to which Kaminoseki

belonged, exploited its position on these routes to develop a complex loan-and-storage system in designated ports. Working alongside individual private agents such as the Kaga-ya, these domain agents also made tidy profits which Choshu authorities would eventually use in the 1860s to purchase guns to topple the Tokugawa shogunate.

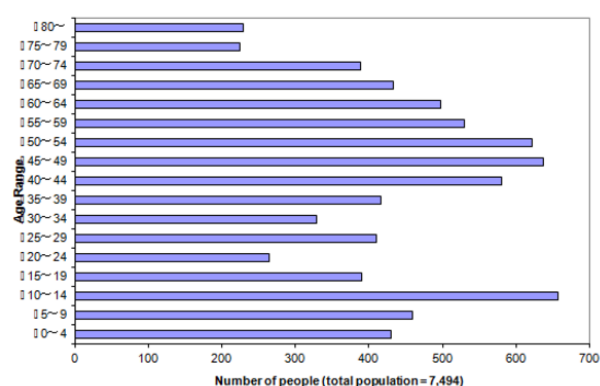
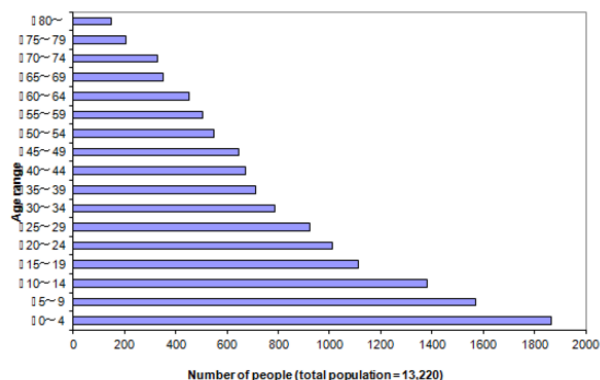
Due both to its fortuitous location and to the investment of the Choshu domain, Kaminoseki thus became one of the most prosperous ports in one of the most prosperous regions of mid-nineteenth-century Japan. The town's population more than doubled as a result partly of inward migration, and the booming port offered multiple labour opportunities to households that were nominally registered as farmers. Indeed, Thomas C. Smith's seminal 1969 essay on farm family by-employments in nineteenth-century Japan was based on data from Kaminoseki and neighbouring villages on the Murotsu peninsula. By-employments, he argued, help explain why Japan made such a remarkable transition from a preindustrial to an industrial economy from the late-nineteenth century onwards, and why 'premodern' economic growth was generally followed by 'modern growth'.¹¹

Except that in Kaminoseki itself, premodern growth was *not* followed by modern growth. One reason for this development, or lack thereof, can be explained by the presence of the third element in the sign, the motorized ship. As steam replaced sail, ships no longer needed to await appropriate tides and winds in Kaminoseki's welcoming port. The port was in any case too small and too shallow for the newer, bigger vessels, and as those ships began to pass through the straits—rather than stopping in them—the prosperity of influential merchant households such as the Kaga-ya was fatally undermined.

The decline of the Kaminoseki hometown was not a linear process. From the 1880s onwards, farmers whose livelihoods had previously been supplemented through by-employments in the port found new working opportunities in the Asia-Pacific region as part of the growing Japanese

diaspora; those who made a success of their lives overseas sent back remittances to support their families and homeland communities. Meanwhile, in the mid-twentieth-century decades, men such as Katayama Hideyuki bought their own ships (not dissimilar to the one depicted in the sign) and transported coal from Kyushu to the newly industrializing cities of the Inland Sea. This maritime transportation industry supported a plethora of secondary businesses in the town.

Nevertheless, by the late 1970s, the economic realities of Kaminoseki were stark to behold. Where the sea had once brought riches, it now rendered the hometown isolated from the mainland. The opening of the Great Bridge in 1969, officials privately conceded, only facilitated the exodus of young people from the town. As with many other communities in rural Japan, Kaminoseki was gripped by a depopulation crisis.



The population of Kaminoseki town by age, 1950 and 1975

fried fresh every morning, leaving a mouth-watering aroma to waft over the port. The second sign depicts a family enjoying a picnic within view of the nuclear power plant (those fumbling for an cheap gag might venture, a *nuclear* family). The slogan announces: 'A town of vitality, together with nuclear power'.



'A town of vitality, together with nuclear power': Kaminoseki district, Kaminoseki town

victim with nuclear scientist—was a timely reminder of Japan's post-Oil Shock need (according to Tokyo policymakers) to embrace peaceful atomic energy.

From a Kaminoseki perspective, however, the silences in *Hatoko's Sea* were as significant as the storyline itself. One fact glossed over in the drama was that the town was officially the poorest in Yamaguchi prefecture by the late 1950s—an extraordinary decline in fortunes compared to its prosperity just a century earlier. Prefectural bureaucrats suggested that one of the solutions to poverty and municipal overpopulation would be for young people to leave the town. This they did in remarkable numbers, as attested by the population charts above. But unlike Hatoko and her son, these workers and their children very rarely returned to Kaminoseki. Thus, the appropriation of Hatoko's name for an iconic waterfront store was as much a statement of hope as expectation—hope not only for tourists inspired to visit the town by the drama but also for the return of young people.

Such hope was evident also in the picnicking idyll of the pronuclear iconography. But here there was expectation, too. The sign shows a smooth, two-laned road snaking over the spine of Nagashima towards the two-reactor plant. Along the way, it passes a roadside park and a fishing port amply protected by sturdy seawalls and breakwaters. To local viewers, such imagery was a gentle reminder of the practical

The two men most immediately responsible for charting a new course for the municipality at the turn of 1980 were its mayor, Kano Shin (served 1971-1983) and the speaker of its town council, Katayama Hideyuki (served 1978-1982). Katayama, as we have seen, was a freight ship owner who had built up his business from scratch in the immediate post-war years; Kano was the sixth-generation head of the Kaga-ya merchant household, doyen of the old port. In their new year messages of 1980, both addressed Kaminoseki's multiple problems. Kano wrote of the need to attract business to the town as part of the municipality's depopulation countermeasures. Katayama, for his part, foreshadowed the pronuclear rhetoric of the roadside sign by praying that the new decade would be 'an era full of vitality and profit'.

Kano and Katayama's messages, and their increasingly desperate attempts to court major corporations (including an aborted plan for Mitsubishi to build a Liquefied Petroleum Gas depot in the town in the late 1970s), force us to reconsider the 'vitality' of the Japanese post-war economic model. Yoshimi Shun'ya has recently argued that 3.11 marked the 'decisive end' of the 'affluent post-war'.¹² The word Yoshimi uses for 'affluence' (*yutaka*) is the same as that used in the pronuclear sign quoted above—a 'town of vitality and richness'. But in Kaminoseki's case, the real affluence occurred less in the post-war decades than in the mid-nineteenth century, in the increasingly distant past. By the beginning of the 1980s, townspeople may have been richer than their Edo-period ancestors in material terms (as measured by colour televisions, air conditioners, car ownership and so on), but affluence as a state of mind was still an unfulfilled dream for a future era.

III

Having passed through the old Murotsu port and crossed the Great Bridge to Nagashima, we descend into the heart of historical Kaminoseki. As we do so, we pass a second set of signs. One advertises [Hatoko's Tempura](#), a second-generation store overlooking the straits where the tempura is

The name 'Hatoko' refers not to the tempura store's owner but to an NHK morning drama, *Hatoko no umi* (*Hatoko's Sea*), broadcast in 1974-1975. The eponymous protagonist is a young girl who survives but is orphaned by the Hiroshima atomic bombing. By a circuitous route she ends up in Kaminoseki, where she is adopted by a local family and spends the rest of her childhood years. At the age of twenty, she then sets out to make a life for herself in Tokyo. There she marries a nuclear physicist working on atomic energy, but the frustrations of life as a housewife in Tokaimura are eventually too much for her, and at the end of the drama she returns to Kaminoseki to enrol her young son in the same elementary school that she herself entered thirty years previously.

As with many other NHK morning dramas broadcast since the genre's inception in 1961, *Hatoko's Sea* served as a parable of post-war Japan. At its most basic level, the story of an ordinary woman overcoming traumatic hardships was a metaphor for the recovery of Japan from the depths of war. Moreover, the sub-plot of her relationship with the nuclear scientist—a symbolic and initially harmonious coupling of atomic bomb

hardships of living in a remote island-municipality—the poor access to the interior and the annual threat of major typhoon damage to local fishing communities, to name but two. Equally, the sign also suggested some of the ‘riches’ that would come townspeople’s way should they start off down the road towards hosting a nuclear plant.

Indeed, one of the most important central government reforms in the wake of the 1973 Oil Shock was to reorganize the subsidies paid to nuclear host communities so as better to incentivize local residents to support plant construction in their back yards. Crucially, those subsidies could be paid even before plant construction began.

As of autumn 2011, therefore, Kaminoseki’s ports did indeed boast stronger seawalls and new breakwaters—this was particularly evident in Iwaishima, where antinuclear sentiment ran highest. There was indeed a new municipal park, overlooking the straits, and construction continues to this day on a smashing new road that runs the length of Nagashima. Nuclear subsidies had also paid for a new elementary school, new community centres, subsidized bus fares, free flu vaccinations and much more besides. In December 2011, a new hot-spring resort opened on the Murotsu side of the straits courtesy of yet more nuclear subsidies. Its name is [Hatoko’s Hot-Spring](#).

In total, the town had received approximately 4.5 billion yen (\$59 million) from Tokyo by 2011, plus another 2.4 billion yen from Chugoku Electric. An additional 8.6 billion yen was due to be paid to Kaminoseki during the first full year of plant construction—almost twice the total budget of the town in 2011-12.¹³

All of which implies that the majority of townspeople, with the exception of most households on Iwaishima, were enticed to become pronuclear by the huge riches on offer (not only to the town as a whole, but also to individual fishermen through compensation packages for their fishing rights, and to all townspeople as of 2010).¹⁴ That is partly true, but it overlooks a crucial element of the DIMBY decision, namely the structure of local civil society.

Political scientists tend to measure the strength of civil society through so-called ‘horizontal associations’—farming and fishing cooperatives, chambers of commerce, trade unions, parent-teacher associations (PTAs) and other voluntary organizations—that are usually assumed to be autonomous from the state. In his book *Site Fights*, Daniel P. Aldrich argues that the state will actively avoid proposing controversial facilities in localities that are characterized by strong horizontal associations, because strong civil society is more likely to lead to organized grassroots resistance.¹⁵

Chugoku Electric had itself experienced such resistance in the late 1970s, when it was publicly rebuffed in its attempts to build a nuclear power station in Hohoku town, northern Yamaguchi prefecture. One criticism of its attempts to garner support in Hohoku was that it had focused only on wooing the town’s elites. In Kaminoseki, by contrast, company strategy would be to focus on the community, especially on the smallest units of political control in Japan, the *jichitai*.

What was the process by which an outside company could reach down to this level of local society? As a hypothetical exercise, I once asked one man who knew about Chugoku Electric’s strategy in Kaminoseki to describe for me whom a major corporation might contact if it wished to approach a small municipality. They would start of course with the mayor, he said. To that end, the company was assisted by the fact that the then speaker of the Yamaguchi prefectural assembly was high-school classmates with Kaminoseki mayor Kano Shin. The speaker allegedly contacted Kano sometime in the summer of 1981 to discuss Chugoku Electric’s on-going siting difficulties and to suggest an opportunity for what the mayor had previously called ‘business investment’.

Then, the man continued, the company would approach the speaker of the council and various other councillors, the head of each district in the town (*kucho*), followed by the group heads (*honcho*) within those districts. At the same time, company employees would want to contact the heads of the farming and fishing cooperatives, and of course the chair of the Chamber of Commerce.

In this summary, the man described representatives of the local state (the mayor and town councillors) and of local civil society (the cooperatives, and the Chamber of Commerce), with the district heads occupying a somewhat grey zone in-between. In many cases, however, these respective representatives of state and civil society were one and the same man. For example, the chair of the Chamber of Commerce in 1981 was Katayama Hideyuki’s predecessor as speaker of the Kaminoseki town council (served 1970-1978). The head of the Kaminoseki district (*kucho*) was also a former councillor and chair of a voluntary group that lobbied for company investment in the municipality. Elsewhere in the town, town councillors served as anticrime volunteers, PTA chairs, farming cooperative heads, and shrine elders.

Thus one characteristic of Kaminoseki was that, because of the multiple roles that some of the municipality’s most influential men performed, many of the so-called horizontal associations within civil society were only nominally autonomous from local government and thus, by extension, from the state itself. Rather than being marked by strong horizontal associations, civil society in Kaminoseki was characterized by strong vertical structures in which power resided in the hands of a minority. By targeting this oligarchy, whose members included the descendants of Edo-period elite households such as Mayor Kano, a company such as Chugoku Electric would have had multiple opportunities simultaneously to penetrate the town’s politics and civil society.

As an ordinary townspeople, one’s exposure to Chugoku Electric’s plan—exposure that allegedly occurred through invitations to secret drinking parties and ‘study trips’ to other nuclear plants in Japan—was thus most likely to have been mediated by men who were powerful in the worlds both of town politics and of local civil society. Consequently, one’s pronuclear decision was as likely to be based on social, political, and even historical obligations to that mediator (who had graciously extended the invitation) as it was on a clear grasp of technical issues relating to atomic energy. Equally, while financial incentives—new roads, new ports, new parks—no doubt had some impact on local residents, the nature of those residents’ social bonds to town elites and to their neighbours and relatives may have been most critical in determining their attitude towards the proposed nuclear power plant.

IV.

The pristine new road out of Kaminoseki takes us past the new elementary school and westwards above the south coast of Nagashima, affording magnificent views across the Inland Sea towards Shikoku. For nearly two decades, a striking image greeted the traveller on the approach to the small hamlet of Kamai (population 71), halfway down the island. On the Nagashima side of the Great Bridge, an elderly couple and a middle-aged mother joyfully welcome young workers returning to the hometown under the slogan, ‘Charming town-making, together with nuclear power’.

But one problem for the pronuclear lobby in the mid-1980s was that the kinds of visitors now crossing into the town over the bridge undermined any vision of ‘charming town-making’ through nuclear power. By early 1983, major teaching, public service and labour unions had joined

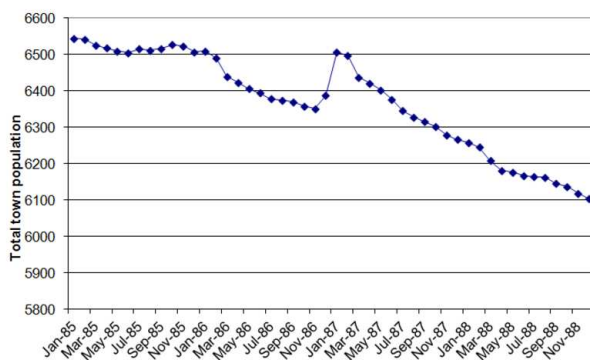


'Charming town-making, together with nuclear power': Kamai district, Kaminoseki town (2004)

Iwaishima's antinuclear activists in regular demonstrations on the streets of Kaminoseki, while ultranationalist thugs in their all-black buses entered the fray on the pronuclear side. As much as possible, the two groups were kept apart—and on opposite sides of the bridge—by hundreds of riot police bussed in from the prefectural capital.

Of equal concern to the pronuclear lobby was the impact of external events on the Kaminoseki nuclear plan. On the six-month anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster—26 October 1986, a date designated since the 1960s as Nuclear Power Day in Japan—yet another antinuclear demonstration was held in Kaminoseki. Between 800 and 1,200 protesters packed into the narrow, Edo-period streets of the once-thriving port community, the highest number to date. And doubtless with a sinking feeling in their stomachs, town officials realized that the date of the next mayoral election, in which new mayor Katayama Hideyuki would seek a second term, was scheduled to fall exactly on the first anniversary of Chernobyl, 26 April 1987.

At this point, something extraordinary occurred. Having fallen by 52 percent since 1950, the town's population started to rise—by 2.4 percent in December 1986 and January 1987 alone, to 6,500 residents.



The population of Kaminoseki town, 1985-1988

So extraordinary was this statistical counter-trend that a few months later, the police opened an investigation. What they discovered were irregularities in the applications of all but four of the 155 new town 'residents'. In March 1988, they indicted 118 people, including 116 confirmed pronuclear supporters, for registering to vote in Kaminoseki while still residing elsewhere. Of these 118 defendants, 111 were summarily prosecuted and fined, including six employees of Chugoku Electric, the deputy speaker of the town council, and the second son of Mayor Katayama (who won re-election in 1987 by a 700-vote margin). During the investigation, Chugoku Electric repeatedly denied having coordinated any wrongdoing.

The mayoral election was perhaps the most egregious example—but hardly the only one—of the widespread bitterness, distrust and underhand behaviour that characterized daily life in 1980s Kaminoseki. At the beginning of the 1990s, however, with the nuclear plan mired in compensation battles and legal challenges, the pronuclear lobby adopted

a new strategy. A new pressure group, the Kaminoseki Municipal Town-Making Liaison Committee, was formed on Nuclear Power Day in 1991 and it was this group that erected the pronuclear billboards around the town.

The billboards, it was explained to me, were part of an attempt to focus less on the 'hard' arguments for the nuclear plant (tax revenues, new infrastructure, etc.) but rather on a softer approach which prioritized the 'harmony' of the townspeople. Chugoku Electric would make the case for the plant's safety (*anzen*), while the Liaison Committee would promote community 'peace of mind' (*anshin*). This was the idea behind both the three signs that contained images and other, text-only slogans such as: 'Bright and rich *furusato*-making through a nuclear power station: [bringing] vitality to young people and comfort to the elderly.' In all the signs, which targeted local residents, the word order was deliberate and crucial: the benefits for the community—vitality, richness, charm, brightness—preceded any mention of the nuclear plant.¹⁶ (Meanwhile, the word for 'nuclear plant' itself was not *genpatsu*, which sounds uncomfortably close to *genbaku*, nuclear bomb, but rather *genden*, literally 'nuclear electricity'.)¹⁷

The use of the emotive word *furusato* (literally, 'old village') was particularly significant in this and other pronuclear propaganda. With its nostalgic overtones, *furusato* was thought to remind townspeople of a better past, of a time when the town was livelier and richer and boasted more young people than in its depopulated present. Meanwhile, Chugoku Electric promised Kaminoseki residents a brighter future through nuclear power—a discourse that could be found in other nuclear sites throughout Japan, including in Fukushima.¹⁸ The bridge in the Liaison Committee's signs was thus both literal (the Kaminoseki Great Bridge) and also figurative: through the construction of a nuclear power plant, townspeople were offered a bridge from the Kaminoseki of the present to that of the future and equally from the promised vision of the future to the idealized memory of the past.

As for the Kaminoseki past, that was conjured up in a new summer festival launched in 1991, sponsored by central government subsidies and by Chugoku Electric. The name of the festival is the Suigun Matsuri, a less-than-subtle reference to the Murakami Suigun militia castle that stood above the straits in the fifteenth century. As a historical event, the Suigun Matsuri is a travesty—indeed, the castle's remains were razed in the 2000s so that the new municipal park, a self-styled 'History Park', could be built in its place—but that is not the point. The point is the slogan on the Chugoku Electric plastic fans, distributed to festival-goers when I attended in 2007: 'Towards a Bright Future: Kaminoseki Nuclear Power Plant, hand-in-hand with the local community'.

We would do well to take this rhetoric seriously in our analyses of the nuclear power industry in Japan—more seriously than we have to date. Twenty years is a long time for language, imagery and the manipulation of the past to percolate into the consciousness of an ever-shrinking community. One could make the argument that Kaminoseki's mayoral election in 1987 was, especially in the wake of Chernobyl, primarily an election about nuclear power—hence the sustained efforts (both legal and illegal) by the pronuclear lobby to secure a favorable result. By contrast, the mayoral election in 2011 was, despite Fukushima, primarily about town-making. That is, two decades of rhetoric in Kaminoseki meant that the 'myth of safety' and its national exposure in the wake of 3.11 was less of an issue in Kaminoseki than we might expect, for townspeople who voted for the incumbent mayor in 2011 were thinking less of *anzen* (safety) than of *anshin*—and the myth of future 'peace of mind' is still alive and well.

By the summer of 2011, of course, some of that rhetoric had been toned down. At that year's Suigun Matsuri, the sponsor's fans simply read, 'Chugoku Electric: together with you, together with the earth,' with no mention of the Kaminoseki plant and certainly none of a bright(er) future. But in another post-3.11 change, the 'charming town-making' sign at Kamai has been replaced by a blunter message aimed at outsiders.



'Those who want to obstruct the nuclear power plant, don't come to Kaminoseki!' Kamai district, Kaminoseki town (2012)

'Those who want to obstruct the nuclear power plant, don't come to Kaminoseki!' it reads. 'The majority of townspeople are hoping for its construction. Despite that, will you still obstruct the plan?'

V

And what of the minority, those who would obstruct the nuclear plan but who also come from Kaminoseki? This, too, is a long and complex story, almost as long as the history of Iwaishima itself, which first appears in written records in the *Man'yōshū* collection (759). 'Welcome to the Man'yo Island,' reads a sign in Iwaishima's newly expanded port, where we disembark having taken the ferry from Kaminoseki, Kamai, or Shidai—the village closest to the planned nuclear site.

The welcome from islanders was not always as warm as it invariably is today. Visitors in the 1980s were greeted not by the Man'yo'shu sign but by 'Total opposition to the nuclear plant!'—that is, when they were allowed onto the island at all. Officials from the town were regularly denied entry, and in a couple of notorious incidents in 1984 and 1985—immediately after the pronuclear council resolutions, in which Iwaishima councillors controversially voted with the majority— islanders blockaded the port from their own elected representatives. In one instance, a nine-hour improvised

blockade was only broken when 70 police officers were hastily ferried in; in the second, Iwaishima's councillors were prevented from returning to their homes for 40 days.

The Iwaishima blockades point to an inconvenient truth for [those who have lauded the antinuclear movement](#), particularly in the wake of 3.11. Since 1982, the nuclear dispute in Kaminoseki has unfolded less between right-wingers and left-wingers, or between Liberal Democratic Party supporters and Socialist or Communist Party supporters, than between and within different districts of the municipality. The huge imbalance of resources in favour of the pronuclear forces notwithstanding, both sides engaged in intimidation and provocation, with almost any means apparently justifying the ends.

To understand the intensity of feelings on Iwaishima, we need look no further than a final sign, one that appears one hundred metres or so to the left as we disembark the ferry and walk the uneven waterfront street. 'Three *furusato* poems,' it is entitled:



'Three *furusato* poems': Iwaishima district, Kaminoseki town

People call our village, 'Hatoko's Sea',

so why are the waves of the nuclear power station all astir?

My mother sent seaweed bearing the smell of the shore,

her affection in the taste of my *furusato*.

As spring approaches, my childhood days, playing in the shallows of the beach,

are still in my dreams.¹⁹

The sea, the shore, the beach: as one might expect, a key platform of the antinuclear movement has been environmental protection. Were the power station to be built, it would be the only nuclear plant within the Seto Inland Sea National Park, and campaigners have expended much energy highlighting the possible impact of hot-water discharges on local biodiversity, as symbolized by the distinctive *sunameri*, a finless porpoise

found in these waters.

But the first poem goes further than simply depicting the sea in general terms: it speaks specifically of Hatoko's sea, thus taking a story irrevocably associated with Kaminoseki district and appropriating it—twenty-five years before Hatoko's name was reappropriated by the subsidy-endowed hot-spring—as an antinuclear image for Iwaishima. Similarly, the word *furusato*, used by pronuclear activists, is here given a strongly antinuclear twist. And it is also worth noting the silences of the poems. There is no mention of the 'town' (*machi*), a word imbued with pronuclear meanings in the Liaison Committee's signs; instead, Iwaishima is referred to as a 'village' (*sato*)—and indeed, antinuclear activists in the 1990s were careful to use the language not of 'town-making' (*machi-zukuri*) but of 'island rejuvenation' (*shima-okoshi*) so as to distinguish their efforts from the policies of the pronuclear municipal bureaucracy.

The poems are thus one more example of the ways in which the nuclear dispute in Kaminoseki was transformed into a battle not only over safety and inward investment but also over rhetoric. But as with the linguistic turn in history more generally, we can take this discursive analysis too far. Islanders opposed the nuclear plan over much more visceral fears than linguistic appropriation, as is indicated by the location of the sign.

The *furusato*-poems sign stands adjacent to the main Iwaishima port. From almost any point on this waterfront, one can look over the sea walls and beyond the newly constructed breakwaters—and there, just four kilometres across the sea, is Tanoura bay. If the pronuclear lobby in Nagashima can be characterized as DIMBY, then Iwaishima islanders' opposition to Chugoku Electric is perhaps best summarized, at its most fundamental level, as Not In My Front Yard. Indeed, the daily unavoidability of seeing the planned site from almost anywhere within Iwaishima village arguably exacerbates the sense of fear in the community. (This is the flip-side of a phenomenon noted by anthropologist Françoise Zonabend in La Hague, France, where local residents denied the danger of having a nuclear waste processing centre in their midst by claiming 'not to see' the plant.)²⁰ The proximity of Iwaishima to the Tanoura site also explains the activists' contention that they would be the first to become 'refugees' in the event of an accident—a claim that has taken on greater urgency since the Fukushima evacuations.



Tanoura bay from Iwaishima island, 2004

At the same time, the *furusato*-poems sign backs on to the Iwaishima fishing cooperative. Since the mid-1980s, the cooperative has been at the forefront of the antinuclear campaign in Iwaishima under the leadership of its chair, Yamato Sadao, a former town councillor and some-time mayoral candidate (including in the September 2011 election). Given the proximity of the planned nuclear site to Iwaishima fishing waters, Iwaishima's fishermen would be among those most disrupted both by long years of construction and by hot-water discharges from the plant. As a result, they have been offered some of the biggest compensation packages by Chugoku Electric—money that the cooperative has, to date, refused to accept.

But the political strength of the fishing lobby within Iwaishima itself only dates back to the 1980s. Despite the island appearing to be a 'half-farming, half-fishing' society for much of the twentieth century, power on Iwaishima lay squarely in the hands of a landowner-farmer elite. In the early 1980s, it was members of this elite who monopolized all the leadership roles within civil society—including chair of the fishing cooperative—and who also represented islanders on the town council. These councillors were allegedly turned by the behind-the-scenes lobbying of the pronuclear lobby and Chugoku Electric; what is certain is

that they ended up voting in favour of construction of the plant.

Unlike in Kaminoseki, however, the vertical structures of civil society only held partially firm on Iwaishima—perhaps because concerns over the proximity of Tanoura bay ultimately overrode centuries-old social and political loyalties on the island. From late-1982 onwards, therefore, the antinuclear majority at times brutally ostracized pronuclear supporters in the island's historical elite from daily life. That the antinuclear majority also included some members of that landowning elite only made the division more bitter and contentious.

Symbolic of the turmoil within Iwaishima society in the mid-1980s was the *kanmai* festival, a nominally Shinto celebration dating back to the Heian period (794-1185). A weeklong event, held once every four years, the *kanmai* commemorates the agricultural foundations of the island and thus implicitly celebrates the societal leadership of its landowning elites. In 1984 and 1988, however, the festival was cancelled as a rebuke to those elites. In 1992, the *kanmai* was revived, this time as an explicitly antinuclear event.²¹ The island's oldest and largest landowning household (a pronuclear supporter) was purged from its ceremonial role in the *kanmai*, as was the island's Shinto priest. Indeed, antinuclear activists disowned their parish altogether, cultivating ties instead with a shrine in northern Kyushu. Playing on the long tradition of islanders seeking work away from Iwaishima, including overseas in the pre-war years, one man joked that the island now had *dekasegi kami-sama*—'out-migrating deities'.

When we study post-war rural communities, we tend to employ atomic metaphors almost without thought: we write about the changing significance of the nuclear family, or the need for a critical mass of workers, or about the atomization of community life. But in Kaminoseki and Iwaishima, the intensity of the dispute made these metaphors real as families found themselves divided by nuclear politics as a 'site fight' became also a fight over history, ritual and the role of historical elites in the town. At the most intense moments of conflict, civil society in Kaminoseki was replaced by uncivil society, as demonstrators screamed and officials schemed: a late-twentieth-century hometown, dying for survival.

VI

Take a stroll up the winding mountain road to the west of Iwaishima village, past a quiet and beautiful cemetery, and you'll come upon an opening in the trees. From there you can look over waters as still as the land itself to Tanoura bay, Nagashima, Murotsu peninsula and the mountains of Yamaguchi prefecture in the far distance. The only thing spoiling this picturesque scene is a single electricity pylon, its tall pole breaking the undulating horizon.



Iwaishima district, Kaminoseki town, 2004

On reflection, however, the pylon seems a wholly appropriate addition to the landscape. At a stretch, silhouetted against the late afternoon sky, it could even be seen to resemble a ship's mast, with taut ropes stretching to the deck below.²²

From wind power to electric power, from 'rice paddy bay' (Tanoura) to proposed nuclear plant: this is a story of modern transformations. Indeed, we need not look far to realize that variations on the Kaminoseki theme can be found throughout the advanced industrialized world. Change the crop from rice to wheat, for example, and the contours of Kaminoseki's modern emaciation would be recognizable in the American Great Plains. There, as agricultural communities vanish, locals grapple with 'smart decline' and wind turbines polka-dot the prairies in ever greater numbers, we are witnessing, in the words of a recent *Harper's* report, America's 'broken heartland'.²³

But in addition to the fundamental universality of its story, Kaminoseki offers us important lessons on the particular history of modern Japan. Despite its peripheral appearance today, the town made a not insignificant contribution to the birth of the modern nation. In the mid-nineteenth

century, with its booming port economy, it was an exemplar of a proto-industrializing region. By the mid-1860s, political and military forces from within that region—the Choshu domain—were fermenting a movement against the Tokugawa shogunate that culminated in the Meiji Restoration of 1868, a movement in which Kaminoseki townspeople had a part. In economic and political terms, Kaminoseki thus played a role in the making of modern Japan.

But the Kaminoseki story is as equally important for what did not happen in the town. The proto-industrial economy did not industrialize—a timely reminder to historians that premodern growth does *not* necessarily lead to modern growth. Instead, after the initial crash of the late-

1870s and early 1880s, caused by the declining significance of domestic sail-ships, town leaders lurched from panacea to panacea—overseas migration, maritime transportation, post-war out-migration, and ultimately DIMBY. At the same time, there was no democratic transformation in the town, despite the holding of regular elections. Albeit with predominantly new members, the oligarchic structure of politics and civil society remained the same from the late-nineteenth to the late-twentieth centuries.

If this tale of economic decline and democratic deficit sounds familiar, that's because it is. The story of Kaminoseki is both that of the towns now hosting the Fukushima nuclear plants and of Tohoku more generally—the marginalization of a region, its 'Faustian bargain' with Tokyo, and ultimately its dependence on the nuclear power industry.²⁴

The history I've sketched in this article thus partly serves as an indictment of the so-called 'nuclear village', in which local activists are as enthusiastic as central lobbyists in moulding civil society and the discourse of nuclear power away from issues of safety to questions of town-making and community survival. At the same time, it is an indictment of the plight of the twentieth-century Japanese village more generally. We may feel that rural decline is a 'natural' and 'inevitable' cost of industrialization and modernization, but as Kawanishi Hidemichi reminds us with his pun on the word 'famine' (*kyosaku*, 凶作・凶策), and indeed as the Diet Commission on Fukushima has recently concluded, there is always something manmade even in 'natural' disasters.²⁵

If the history of Kaminoseki thus highlights a fundamental truth—that for many decades there have been two Japans, Tokyo and the regions, and that this imbalance will not change despite 3.11—then it not only contributes to our understanding of the making of modern Japan; it also indicates the extent to which today's political and economic structures are broken. For don't the images of abandoned villages and silent towns in the Fukushima exclusion zone merely represent a fast-forwarded version of Kaminoseki's future fate—if a nuclear power plant is not built in its back yard?

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Notes

¹ Sasaki Minoru, *Kaminoseki gikai dayori*, 22 April 2011 (no. 114); *Chugoku Shinbun*, 28 June 2011, p. 25, and 30 June 2011, p. 3 (hereafter, CS, www.chugoku-np.co.jp). In what follows, I have only referenced primary materials that do not appear in [my book](#). I am grateful to Takehiko Kariya, Ian Neary and Mark Rebeck for giving me the opportunity to try out some of these post-book ideas at a conference on 3.11 at the Nissan Institute, University of Oxford, 23-24 March 2012, and especially to Peter Wynn Kirby for his insightful comments at the conference. Many thanks also to Mark Selden and Ben Houston for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

² Hayden S. Lesbirel (1998), *NIMBY Politics in Japan: Energy Siting and the Management of Environmental Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

³ The Federation of Electric Power Companies of Japan (2012), [Electricity Review Japan 2012](#) (last accessed 26 July 2012)

⁴ In an editorial on 30 July 2012, the CS criticized Yamamoto's relative silence on the Kaminoseki plan, arguing that he gave the impression of wanting to avoid the issue during the election campaign: www.chugoku-np.co.jp, accessed 30 July 2012.

⁵ Anonymous interview, April 2011.

⁶ Tomomi Yamaguchi (2011), 'The Kaminoseki Nuclear Power Plant: Community Conflicts and the Future of Japan's Rural Periphery', [The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol. 9, Issue 41 No. 3](#), October 10, 2011.

⁷ CS, 26 September 2011.

⁸ My thanks to Tom Gill for this insight.

⁹ The National Diet of Japan (2012), [The official report of The Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission, Executive Summary](#) (NAIIC) (July 2012), p. 9.

¹⁰ All the photographs in this article were taken by the author.

¹¹ Thomas C. Smith (1969), 'Farm Family By-employments in Preindustrial Japan', *The Journal of Economic History*, 29, 4: 687-715.

¹² Yoshimi Shun'ya (2012), 'Radioactive Rain and the American Umbrella', trans. Shi-Lin Loh. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 71, 2: 319-331.

¹³ CS, 28 September 2011 and 1 October 2011. The total budget of Kaminoseki in 2011-12 was 4.4 billion yen: [Kaminoseki koho](#), 14 April 2011. In a little-noticed announcement, Tokyo stated that it would increase nuclear subsidies to host communities just a few weeks after 3.11: Hiroshi Onitsuka (2012), 'Hooked on Nuclear Power: Japanese State-Local Relations and the Vicious Cycle of Nuclear Dependence', [The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol. 10, Issue 2, No. 2](#), January 13, 2012.

¹⁴ Since 2010, every resident of Kaminoseki municipality has been entitled to an annual voucher worth 20,000 yen, redeemable in local shops and businesses. As of March 2012, Kaminoseki residents had thus received half of the 80,000 yen that TEPCO proposed to pay the adult

residents of Fukushima prefecture in compensation. See David McNeill (2012), 'The Fukushima Nuclear Crisis and the Fight for Compensation', [*The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol. 10, Issue 6, No. 6*](#), March 5, 2012.

¹⁵ Daniel P. Aldrich (2008), *Site Fights: Divisive Facilities and Civil Society in Japan and the West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

¹⁶ Anonymous interview, 2008. I have adjusted my translations from earlier publications in order to reflect this point.

¹⁷ This avoidance of the word *genpatsu* was deliberate on the part of pronuclear campaigners: see Yamaguchi, 'The Kaminoseki Nuclear Power Plant', note 18.

¹⁸ Kainuma Hiroshi (2011), '*Fukushima*'-ron: *genshiryoku-mura wa naze umareta no ka?* (Tokyo: Seidosha), p. 113 and passim.

¹⁹ My thanks to Kyoko Selden for suggesting a more sophisticated translation of the first *tanka* poem than that I have previously used.

²⁰ Françoise Zonabend (1993), *The Nuclear Peninsula*, trans. J. A. Underwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

²¹ The *kanmai* will once again be held from [16-20 August 2012](#). Other than an arcane debate over the Heian-period origins of the festival—one's view of the exact date depends on whether one is pro- or antinuclear—the week will be largely politics-free. This is because *kanmai* organizers, facing the dearth of young people on the island, have depended on help from the Kaminoseki town office for various aspects of the festival since 2004; such help is offered on the understanding that no antinuclear slogans will be aired.

²² I am grateful to Peter Wynn Kirby for pointing this out.

²³ Wil S. Hylton (2012), 'Broken Heartland: The looming collapse of agriculture on the Great Plains', *Harper's* July 2012: 25-35.

²⁴ William W. Kelly (2012), 'Tohoku's Futures: Predicting Outcomes or Imagining Possibilities?', [*The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol. 10, Issue 10, No. 2*](#), March 5, 2012; Kainuma, '*Fukushima*'-ron; Onitsuka, 'Hooked on Nuclear Power'.

²⁵ Kawanishi Hidemichi (2011), '*Tohoku*' *wo yomu* (Tokyo: Mumyosha), p. 14; The National Diet of Japan, *NAIIC*, p. 16. Kawanishi's pun plays on the second character of *kyosaku* (famine), which he replaces with a character connoting 'government policy'.